

National Institute for the
Blind. London

How the Newly Blind May be
Helped. (Bulletin, No. 12)

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Price 1d.

A nominal charge only is made for this Bulletin,
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Published by the
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224-6-8 Great Portland Street, London, W.1



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How the Newly Blind may be Helped

MEDICAL men, hospital almoners, relieving officers, social workers of all kinds, and those who have friends whose sight has failed, are often perplexed to know how they can put the newly-blind into touch with organisations that may encourage them to believe that their future can still be useful, interesting and happy, and give them, where this is needed, material help.

The Responsible Authority.

Every County Council and County Borough Council is responsible under the Blind Persons Act, 1920, for caring for the blind in its area, and either sets up its own Blind Persons Committee to undertake the work or entrusts it to a voluntary agency for the blind. *The first thing to be done*, therefore, is to put the person whose sight has failed into touch with the Welfare of the Blind Department of the County Council or County Borough Council, by sending his name and address without delay to the Clerk at the County or County Borough offices of the area in which he lives, with the request that, after consideration of the circumstances, any necessary help may be given.

Certification.

Before a blind person can receive help from the local authority he must be certified as coming within the official definition of blindness. The word "blind"

in this connection covers a wide field, including a number of people by no means totally sightless. If sight has so far failed as to make impossible work for which eyesight is essential, a man or woman is "blind." A certificate to this effect should be completed by an ophthalmologist or medical practitioner experienced in ophthalmology, and it is advisable to leave the arrangements for this to the local agency, which generally employs its own form of certificate.

The Young Blind.

Happily, blindness among the young is steadily decreasing, and those to whom this pamphlet is addressed will for the most part be consulted only about those who have lost their sight in adult life. A brief note on the younger blind is, therefore, all that is required.

(A) *The Pre-school Child*.—A blind child under the age of five may be visited by the Maternity and Child Welfare authority in the same way as the normal baby, generally receiving in addition visits from the home teacher of the blind, whose services are provided by the local authority as part of its blind welfare scheme. Children whose parents are unable for any reason to give them the special care and training that a blind baby needs may be received into one of the residential nursery schools belonging to the National Institute for the Blind, and known as the Sunshine Homes. Here the babies are accepted from infancy, and prepared for school life by teaching on recognised nursery school lines, by training in habits of personal hygiene and independence, and by careful observation of their general health.

(B) *The School Child*.—The education of blind children is compulsory between the ages of five and sixteen, and is provided by thirty day and residential schools in various parts of the country. The curriculum is in the main similar to that of ordinary elementary

schools, special stress being laid upon handwork, physical education, and the correction of blind "mannerisms." There is a special school for blind children who are retarded. Those whose intelligence makes them suitable for secondary education, or whose parents are in a position to afford the necessary fees, are accepted at one of three schools—one for boys, one for girls, and one for both boys and girls, with a technical bias, but providing secondary education for some exceptional children.

(c) *The Adolescent*.—At the age of sixteen, the compulsory education of the blind ceases, and the blind boy or girl destined for manual occupation proceeds to training. Industrial training is generally given in one of the following trades: Piano-tuning, the making of baskets, bedding, brushes, furniture or mats, boot-repairing, round and flat machine-knitting and weaving. The training lasts for four years and is accompanied by continued general education. Accommodation is provided for those who cannot live at home.

For the talented boy or girl, education at one of the secondary schools mentioned above is usually continued after the age of sixteen, and where University education seems justified, means can generally be found for supporting a specially brilliant scholar at a University. Those regarded as suitable for professional, rather than industrial training, may be prepared for the professions of massage, music teaching, school teaching, shorthand-typing, or telephony.

Training of the Adult Blind.

Men and women still in the twenties or thirties when they lose their sight must not be allowed to think that the onset of blindness necessarily removes them from the ranks of the employable. It is the duty of the local authority to arrange training for all those who appear likely to benefit thereby. The kind of training

offered will depend on the blind person's former occupation, tastes and abilities, and the prospects in the various trades, which are those noted above in the paragraph dealing with the adolescent. Training generally lasts about three years, and if it has to be arranged at a distance from the blind person's home, lodgings or hostel accommodation are found for him.

An adult who has already been practising a profession when blindness overtakes him may "learn to be blind," and in certain circumstances continue in his profession, and those who are considered suitable for professional rather than industrial training may be helped to secure this. Naturally, however, the local authority scrutinises all applications for such training very thoroughly, and does not accept financial responsibility unless the prospects of future employment are exceptionally good, and the candidate a man or woman of outstanding ability.

Employment.

Those who complete their industrial training satisfactorily are generally offered employment at its close, either in a workshop belonging to the training institution or in some other recognised workshop for the blind, or (especially in the case of those coming from rural areas) as home workers. The blind man in a workshop is generally employed on a piece-work basis, supplemented by what is known as augmentation of wages, in the form of a fixed sum intended to compensate in some degree for the handicap of blindness. Occasionally, however, a time-rate basis is adopted. For those who cannot conveniently be employed in a workshop, arrangements may be made for employment as home workers, under a scheme managed by a society or institution, which supplies materials, supervises the work done, pays wages, and markets such finished products as the worker cannot dispose of without help.

Financial Assistance.

The majority of the men or women with whom the social worker is called upon to deal have lost their sight in middle or late life, and for them training and employment on the lines indicated above will not be practicable. How then can they best be helped?

With the loss of sight in these circumstances, there nearly always goes the haunting fear of poverty, and until the blind person knows that he can rely upon the security of a regular income, he will not be much interested in anything else. The State has recognised this, and has partially met the need by providing that the State pension of 10s. weekly, paid to the seeing person at the age of seventy, is payable to the blind person at fifty,* provided that his income falls within certain recognised limits, and conditions of nationality and residence are fulfilled. The home teachers employed by the local authority will always undertake to help in filling in the forms of application for the Blind Pension.

Where financial assistance from such sources as the Blind Pension, National Health Insurance or Workmen's Compensation is not forthcoming, or is inadequate in itself to enable the blind person to reach a reasonable standard of income, a pension may be secured for him from one of the numerous voluntary Pension Societies. Further, because it is the duty of the local authority to see that every blind person is provided for, that authority may itself make a grant, this grant varying in amount according to the needs of the recipient and the scale of assistance adopted in his area. At the moment of writing the Government has announced that it proposes to introduce legislation at an early date making it obligatory that the financial assistance given by the public authority to unemployable blind persons shall be given under the Blind Persons Act instead of under the Poor Law.

* Legislation reducing the age-limit to forty will probably have been made effective before this pamphlet is in print.

Pastime Occupations.

Once the dread of extreme poverty has been dissipated, it is the task of the local authority to see that the blind who, by reason of age or infirmity, are unsuitable for trade-training and yet are men or women of alert mind, shall not be allowed to stagnate or sit down under the handicap of blindness with folded hands. The home teachers are required to give simple instruction in pastime handicrafts to all willing to learn. Such handicrafts include light basketry, chair-caning, rush-seating, straw and string bag-making, raffia work, rug making and hand-knitting, and the interest in a new craft that can be accomplished even without sight is often responsible for awakening the newly-blind from the lethargy that is all too apt to assail them. Those who come into contact with the blind should also do all in their power to encourage them to continue with whatever hobbies and interests of their seeing days are still possible. The woman who has been fond of housework can still find much to do, for there are but few household tasks beyond the capacity of the intelligent and determined blind woman. The man who has been good at "odd jobs" should still be able to do rough carpentry, to look after poultry, or care for his garden.

Learning to Read.

For many of those suddenly compelled by blindness to lead a comparatively sedentary life, one of the hardest deprivations is the feeling that they have lost the companionship of the printed page, and it is therefore most desirable that everyone who loses his sight in adult years should be encouraged to learn Braille or Mocn.

Braille, the type exclusively used in schools, consists of embossed dots, with no likeness to the ordinary printed alphabet. It can be mastered without great difficulty by those who lose their sight comparatively

young, provided that they are mentally capable of grasping a somewhat highly contracted system and have normally sensitive fingers. The fact that Braille can be written by hand as well as read opens a new field of interest to the blind man who can correspond with fellow-Braillists.

Moon type closely resembles the printed capital alphabet, and to those who have been familiar with this it is therefore considerably easier to learn than Braille. It can be recommended for those who lose their sight late in life, whose fingers have been rendered insensitive by manual work, or who find difficulty in mastering the Braille contractions. Although the selection of books in Moon type is more limited than that in Braille, there is a steadily growing supply.

In both Braille and Moon types there are weekly and monthly periodicals available, the Braille periodicals including a weekly newspaper, an edition of *The Radio Times*, and a variety of monthly magazines ranging from a special edition of *Punch* to a paper for blind Scouts and Guides. Full details of all these can be obtained from the National Institute for the Blind, 224 Great Portland Street, London, W.1.

Braille and Moon books can be purchased at the same address, but although they are sold to the blind at only a fraction of the cost of production, the blind person will normally need more books than he can buy. He can become a member of the National Library for the Blind, Great Smith Street, London, S.W.1, and by so doing will have access to a very wide choice of books, ranging from poetry and philosophy to the most recent detective story, the only expense involved being that of the postage of the books. Here again, however, the blind person has certain privileges, as Braille and Moon literature can be sent at very cheap rates, a volume weighing two pounds costing only one halfpenny to send by post. The blind student who needs text-books has further facilities through the

Students' Library of the National Institute for the Blind, which undertakes to put into Braille any book required for purposes of serious study.

The Talking Book.

For those fairly well off, there is yet another alternative. Within the last year, the Talking Book has been placed on the market. A machine somewhat similar to a gramophone is used, and books are recorded on discs, containing enough reading matter on each side to last about twenty minutes. The Talking Book is not yet within the range of the majority of blind persons, but it holds interesting possibilities for the future.

Broadcasting.

No invention of modern times has meant more to the blind than wireless, and, through the Wireless for the Blind Fund, wireless sets are supplied to all blind persons in Great Britain and Northern Ireland unable to obtain them without help. The Post Office grants wireless licences free of charge to registered blind persons.

Games and Appliances.

Those interested in the welfare of the blind give much thought to devising appliances which may, through the sense of touch, do something to make up for the loss of sight. They are designed to meet the needs of the blind at every point from pure recreation to professional occupation, and include tools for piano-tuners and boot-repairers, delicate apparatus for use by the blind masseur, pen and pencil frames which enable the blind man who writes a letter to keep his lines straight, watches and clocks with raised figures, devices for the blind mathematician, and all kinds of games. There are playing cards marked with Braille and Moon numbers, draught boards with men that

can be distinguished by touch, special adaptations for the playing of chess, backgammon, dominoes, and many other games and puzzles. Advice on apparatus and appliances can be obtained from the home teacher, and the National Institute for the Blind issues an illustrated catalogue.

Social Life.

So far this pamphlet in dealing with pastime handicrafts, reading, wireless and games, has been primarily concerned with the blind man within his own home. One must admit that blindness only too often, especially in the case of the middle-aged and elderly, does narrow life down to the four walls of the house. It is difficult in these days of dangerous traffic for the blind man to leave home without an escort, and this dependence upon others may make outside activities difficult. But because an exclusively indoor life is physically and mentally enervating, the friends of the blind should make every effort to secure for them open air exercise, and as many outdoor interests as possible. For the younger blind man and woman, energetic games and sports, including rowing and swimming, should be possible, and there are flourishing sports clubs for the blind. The blind pedestrian finds the use of a white stick to indicate that he is sightless a useful precaution in traffic.

For those who find it difficult to get an escort for walks the services of a specially trained dog, obtained through the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, sometimes affords a solution, and though this movement can only supply guide dogs to a small and carefully selected minority of blind persons, it is worth mentioning here ; for it has been the means of giving new energy and hope to men and women who enjoy vigorous exercise and the companionship that a loyal and affectionate dog can give.

In many areas, special travelling facilities on bus and tram are offered to blind persons accompanied by

a guide, allowing two persons to travel for a single fare ; similar concessions are made on the principal railway lines to blind persons travelling for business purposes.

In urban areas, home teachers and other workers for the blind often organise handicraft centres and social clubs, where the blind meet for social intercourse, to carry on handicrafts in small groups, to listen to concerts or lectures, and to enjoy the sense of fellowship that membership of a club can give. The Extension Branch of the Girl Guide Movement (Blind Section) also provides for younger blind women and girls that same sense of fellowship, and contact with new interests and ideals. Where no centres for the blind exist, it is often possible for them to join local branches of Toc H, Women's Institutes, Townswomen's Guilds, and similar organisations.

Conclusion.

It has only been possible in this leaflet to deal summarily with the ways in which the blind can be helped, but perhaps enough has been said to show how desirable it is that those who come into contact with any persons suffering the physical and mental shock that the onset of blindness involves shall immediately put them into touch with the local authority in order that help may be forthcoming. The depression of the newly-blind is often both unduly acute and unnecessarily prolonged, because they do not realise the many resources available for them, and the fact that life can still hold much to make it happy.

Finally, however, it should be remembered that in spite of all that may be done to alleviate the condition of blindness, it must always remain a serious handicap, and for that reason it is imperative that every effort should be made to ensure that persons whose sight is deteriorating should seek expert advice without delay. This expert advice *can only be secured at the hands of an ophthalmologist*. Under the Public Health

Act, 1925, local authorities are empowered to make arrangements for the treatment of persons suffering from any disease of or injury to the eyes, and a letter addressed to the County Medical Officer of Health, asking for advice as to the nearest centre for treatment will produce the necessary information.

This Bulletin deals only with the civilian blind. Those whose blindness is thought to be due to War service should be put into touch with St. Dunstan's Organisation for Blinded Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen, St. Dunstan's, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London, N.W.1. Any enquiries relating to the civilian blind may be addressed to the Secretary General, National Institute for the Blind, 224 Great Portland Street, London, W.1.



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